

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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SUBJECT: GOL RELAXES CENSORSHIP FOR THE FOREIGN PRESS

REF: (A) BEIRUT 032, (B) BEIRUT 095, (C) BEIRUT 117

1. SUMMARY: THE LEB GOVT HAS ESTABLISHED A NEW "SELF-CENSORSHIP"
SYSTEM FOR THE FOREIGN BUT NOT THE LOCAL PRESS, ABOLISHING THE RE-
QUIREMENT FOR PRIOR APPROVAL BY THE CENSORRS OF EVERY DISPATTCH. THE
GOVT HOPES THE FOREIGN PRESS CORPS WILL VOLUNTARILY RESPECT THE GOVT'S
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CONCERN WITH THE IMPACT OF CERTAIN CATEGORIES OF NEWS, AND TAKE A
HELPFUL PERSPECTIVE ON THE NEWS IT DOES REPORT. AMBIGUITIES REMAIN,
BUT THE GOL CENSOR WILL APPROACH PROBLEMS WHICH WILL ARISE IN A SPIRIT
OF SEEKING COOPERATION RATHER THAN THROUGH HARSH LEGAL SANCTIONS. TH

FOREIGN PRESS CORPS SEEMS PLEASED WITH THE RESULTS. END SUMMARY.

2. SELF-CENSORSHIP FOR THE FOREIGN PRESS. MAJOR ZAHY BUSTANI, AT THE DIRECTION OF COL ANTOINE DAHDAH, DIR GEN OF SECURITY, INVITED FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS TO A MEETING JAN 25 TO ANNOUNCE NEW, RELAXED CENSORSHIP

RULES FOR THE FOREIGN PRESS. A SYSTEM OF SELF-CENSORSHIP IS TO BE APPLIED TO "FOREIGN AND ARAB" CORRESPONDENTS. THEY NEED NO LONGER SUB-

MIT COPY TO THE CENSOR PRIOR TO DISPATCH, BUT MUST STILL FILE COPY WITH THE CENSOR WITHIN 24 HOURS AFTER ITS DISPATCH. THE SYSTEM OF PRIOR CENSORSHIP (REF A) CONTINUES IN EFFECT FOR THE LOCAL PRESS.

3. "RESPONSIBILITY." FROM SEVERAL AMERICAN JOURNALISTS, WE UNDERSTAND THAT BUSTANI'S PLEA WAS THAT THE FOREIGN PRESS CORPS TAKE AN ATTITUDE OF COOPERATION WITH THE GOVT, AVOIDING STORIES WHICH WOULD TEND TO UNDERMINE THE GOVT'S EFFORTS TOWARDS PACIFICATION, RECONSTRUCTION AND RECONCILIATION. IN PRINCIPLE, THE CATEGORIES OF FORBIDDEN SUBJECTS (REF C) STILL STAND, BUT THEIR INTERPRETATION BY THE CENSORS WILL BE LESS RIGOROUS. IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS BY THE JOURNALISTS SEEKING TO CLARIFY WHAT WOULD BE PERMISSIBLE AND WHAT NOT PERMISSIBLE, BUSTANI IN EFFECT INDICATED THAT THE PRESENTATION OF NEWS WAS AS IMPORTANT AS THE SUBSTANCE. THUS, IT IS PERMISSIBLE TO SPEAK OF "PROGRESSIVE AND CONSERVATIVES," EVEN OF "LEFTISTS AND RIGHTISTS," BUT NOT OF "CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS." ALTHOUGH ALL REPORTING

ON PALESTINIANS HAD BEEN STRICTLY FORBIDDEN, SUCH REPORTING IS NOW ALLOWED IF IT CONCERNS PALESTINIAN PROBLEMS WITH ISRAEL, BUT NOT IF IT DISCUSSES PALESTINIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANESE POLITICS.

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4. SANCTIONS -- THE VELVET GLOVE. WHAT IF A JOURNALIST EXCEEDED THE LIMITS OF WHAT THE CENSOR CONSIDERED PERMISSIBLE? THE FORMAL PENALTIES (REF A) STILL ARE IN EFFECT, BUSTANI SAID, BUT IN PRACTICE

THE CENSORS WOULD CALL THE OFFENDING JOURNALIST IN "FOR A CUP OF COFFEE"

WITH THE IMPLICATION THAT THE CENSORS WILL TRY TO JAWBONING APPROACH, RESERVING HARSHER PENALTIES (OR EXPULSION) FOR DIFFICULT CASES.

5. COMMENT: AS ANTICIPATED (REF C), THE CENSORS HAVE BEGUN TO RELAX THEIR METHODS, NOW THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NECESSITY OF CENSORSHIP AT THE PRESENT TIME IN LEBANON HAS BEEN WIDELY ACCEPTED, EVEN BY FOREIGN JOURNALISTS. WHEREAS SEVERAL AMERICAN CORRESPONDENTS TOLD US EARLY IN JANUARY THAT THEY WERE ABOUT TO PACK THEIR BAGS, THEY ARE NOW LOOKING FOR PERMANENT OFFICES IN BEIRUT AND HUNTING DOWN TELEPHONE

AND TELEX FACILITIES. ONE JOURNALIST TOLD US HE THOUGHT THE GOVT

HAD RECOGNIZED THE VALIDITY IN THEIR ARGUMENT THAT AN EXCESSIVELY RIGID CENSORSHIP SYSTEM WOULD DISCOURAGE THE RETURN OF THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNITY, ITSELF A PRIME GOVT OBJECTIVE. WHATEVER IMPRESSION DAHDAH'S EARLY MOVES HAD CREATED, THE GOL HAS NOW MADE IT CLEAR THAT IT WANTS THE FOREIGN PRESS CORPS TO STAY, AND IS WILLING TO MAKE CONCESSIONS TO THAT END. WE UNDERSTAND, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT THE "CENSORSHIP TAX" (REF B) HAS BEEN QUIETLY DROPPED.

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Message Attributes

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